

## Responding to hate : The Role of Religious Actors

*I would like to thank Congressman Hastings, Senator Cardin, the members of the commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe for inviting me to this hearing. My name is Radia Bakkouch, I am 27 years old. I graduated from Sciences Po Paris in International Relations. I have been president of Coexister, the European interfaith youth movement, for four years. I am a peace activist and a reflective practitioner and I am honored to be here today.*

In France, there is a complex relationship with otherness and with understanding differences. While the overall trend leans towards universalism and the uniformity of cultural practices, spiritual and religious identity resists these mechanisms of standardization, and symbolizes tabou, fear, ignorance. Unfortunately, hate crimes motivated by religious bias only come second in number, behind racially-motivated crimes. For instance, in 2018, the number of antisemitic attacks in France rose by 74%. In the past 10 years, like in Montauban and Toulouse in 2012, in Paris and its northern suburb in 2015, in a church in Saint Étienne de Rouvray in 2016, people were killed because of their religion and people killed in the name of their religion.

If faith is at the heart of tensions, it can also be at the heart of the solution. Coexister is a youth-led interfaith organization gathering Jews, Christians, Muslims, Atheists, Agnostics, Buddhists, from 15 to 35 years old and within our organization, we believe in **the concept of the "faith for good"** and in **the practice of Interfaith cooperation**. In 52 European cities, Coexister has offered to 10,000 young people to experience interfaith diversity in a good way and has tackled stereotypes of 120,000 students. We empower young people and give them the skills, the opportunities and the relationships they need to build peace and prevent any type of violence and exclusion. We offer them safe spaces where they can be fully themselves, with others who are completely different from them, and tools so they can act together for social justice, inclusion, mutual respect and peace.

What are our recommendations ? Thousands of interfaith initiatives and practices exist around the world. The United Religions Initiative network alone already gathers more than 1 000 initiatives in 109 countries. Yet in order to maximise their outreach and systemic impact they have to be State-supported.

1. Defend pluralistic societies

We need to defend, protect and promote a pluralistic society. Citizens can prevent hate against diversity if they are able to face diversity in their daily life. Multiculturalism and communitarianism are not the only ways to apprehend diversity in society.

2. Support “faith for good”

Faith is a specific part of the identity that is substantial, chosen, and can be source of bad and good. Everyone has faith in something, it is not the prerogative of religions only. Linking the spiritual resources to actions toward peacebuilding and social justice strengthen the actions.

3. Practice interfaith cooperation

Faith for good is even stronger when it is used in interfaith cooperation, by bringing people that deeply disagree on their faith together. We need to acknowledge that cooperating with people who are different requires time, practice and willingness.

4. Come out of the communitarian struggles

It is important that not only Jewish people fight against antisemitism, Muslim people fight against islamophobia, etc ! We need to acknowledge all type of hate crimes that target a particular population, and engage everyone to feel concerned by hate crimes.

5. Fight “for” rather than fight “against”

Fighting “against” hate is important, but fighting “for” peace is vital. Our purpose should not only be to diminish hate. It needs to tend towards an ideal model. Non violence is a prerequisite but tolerance is not enough. We defend a society where active coexistence is the method for relationships.

6. Include other actors in the fight against hate

Religious actors can influence the respond to hate but citizens and young people are a great lever also. We usually include young people when we talk about the future, but young people are the citizens of today and they need to be implicated today to face the challenges of our society.

Responding to hate by using faith and religious tools can be efficient and lead to a lasting peace. In Coexister, our founding intuition is that peace must be taught, experimented, and a process of conscientization. We need to learn peace, not learn how to make peace, because it would mean we can not prevent the conflict, but learn and cherish actual peace. We would like to make peace a major learning discipline in all informal educational policies throughout the world.